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EUROPE

Bronze Age Cemetery excavated in Hungary

By Sean McShee  | September 1, 2021

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TWH – A recent article published on the site on [LiveScience.com](#) reported on the interesting discoveries of the large Szigetszentmiklós-Űrgehegy cemetery (S-U cemetery) in Hungary. which dates to the Bronze Age.

Of particular interest were the contents of grave 241. It held the cremated remains of what the researchers referred to as “an elite female” as well as those of her twin fetuses. Pregnant for about seven months, she most likely died from complications of pregnancy or childbirth.

In Hungary, the Bronze Age lasted from 2150 B.C.E. to 1500 B.C.E. Archaeologists have already excavated 525 burials. Claudio Cavazzuti of the University of Bologna said that 1,000s of graves remain to be excavated.

Analysis of one grave provides an outline of a cremation ritual at the S-U cemetery. The research team used [strontium](#) analysis of a sample of the remains which helped to show migration patterns for high-status females. Strontium is an element that is highly reactive, chemically and is used in dating remains, especially teeth and bones.

Cremation Ritual

Most graves contained cremated remains. A few graves contained a complete, buried human body. An article in [PLOS One](#) described the outlines of a Bronze Age cremation and burial ritual.

The body would have been placed on a funeral pyre. The pyre would have burned for several hours. Sometimes, the fire reached a heat of 800° C (1472° F).

After the fire had consumed the body, someone would have collected the ashes, and any remaining bones and teeth. They would then place those ashes, residual bones, teeth, and any grave goods in the funeral urn.

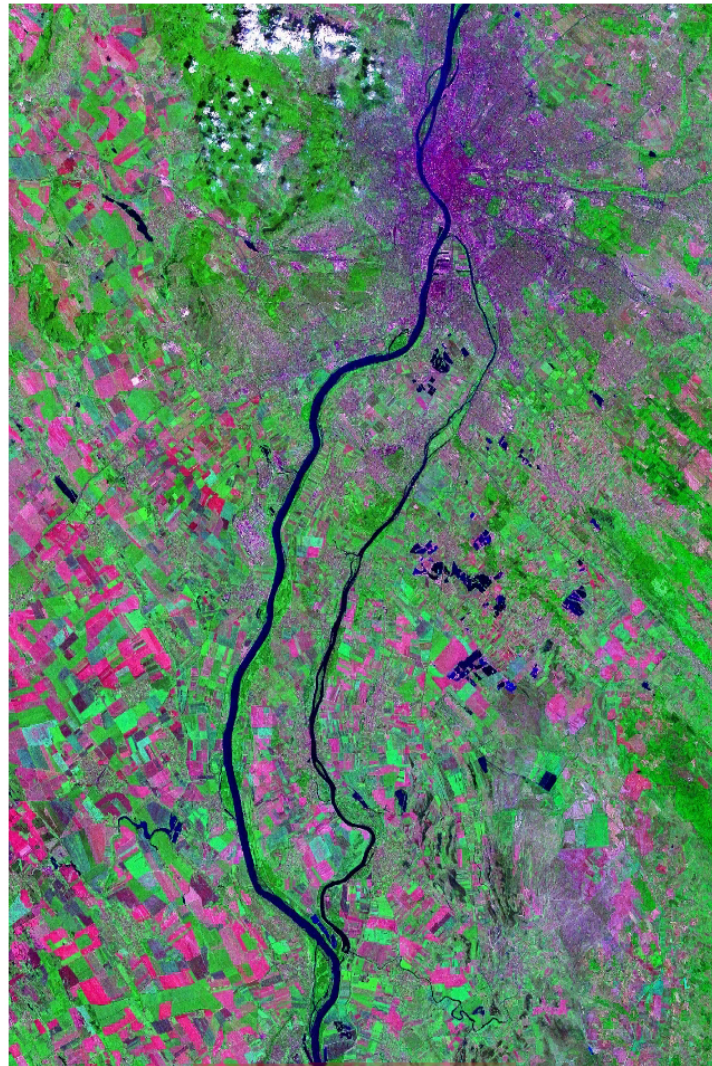
The urn would have stood 35 to 40 cm tall (14 to 16 inches). At its widest, the urn would have measured 30 cm (12 inches). Inside or beside the funeral urn, someone would have set a small cup or dish. Two more cups would have sealed the urn. Next, they would then set the urn in the ground and bury it up to its neckline. Then, they would then cover the urn with stones, perhaps as a sort of grave marker.

While we can infer the basic outline of the cremation ritual, much remains unknown. We do not know who was present such as priests, mourners, or family members, for example, or what words were spoken.

[LiveScience](#) reported that the people of the Vátya culture built and buried their dead in this cemetery. They farmed, herded livestock, and engaged in both local and long-distance trade. They also built fortifications on parts of the Danube.

The S-U cemetery

The article in the online journal [PLOS](#) reported that the S-U cemetery lies on the isle of Csepel, the largest island within the Hungarian Danube. On the eastern side of that island, another Vanya cemetery has been excavated. The two cemeteries lie directly opposite one another, along an East-West axis. Csepel Island lies just south of Budapest.



NASA satellite image of Csepel Island, Hungary [Image credit: [Compactforever](#) – [Public Domain](#)]

Cavazzuti selected 29 graves for a deeper analysis. Twenty-six were cremations in urns and three were burials of the physical body. Only one of these 29 graves contained more than one body, the elite female with her fetuses. All others contained just one body. Archaeologists found no substantial differences between the graves of those buried and those cremated.

Of the 29 analyzed graves, the three buried remains had decomposed too much to be examined. Archaeologists examined the sample of the 26 cremated remains in urns to estimate ages and biological sex. Among the cremated remains, 11 were female adults, seven were male adults, two had undetermined biological sex. Six were children. Among the cremated, 20 were adults, two were children between 5 and 10, and four were between the ages of 2 and 5. Note: the two fetuses were not counted in these age and biological-sex analyses.

While biological sex could be determined for most adult remains, gender identity cannot be known.

One grave stood out, grave 241. Unlike the other graves, the funeral urn in that grave contained more than one set of remains. It contained the cremated remains of one female and those of her two fetuses, as well as their grave goods.

An article in [LiveScience.com](#) reported that in that urn, they found a bronze neck-ring, a gold hair-ring, and bone pins. In the Bronze Age, these grave goods would have marked status. None of the other graves in the S-U cemetery had such high-status grave goods. The female buried in 241 would have been a member of the elite.

According to [Smithsonian Magazine](#), her remains weighed 50% more than those in an average urn. This increased weight suggests a more careful post-pyre collection of her remains.

Strontium analysis to learn where she grew up

The cremation left some of her bones and teeth intact. That allowed researchers to conduct strontium tests. Those tests can reveal where someone grew up.

Researchers can analyze strontium “signatures” in bones and teeth. They then compare those levels with those in the soils of specific regions. Bones and teeth absorb strontium at different ages.

The soil in regions differs in strontium signatures. Plants in a given region absorb the strontium from the soil. Then, those plants store that signature in their tissue. When an animal or human eats those plants, those signatures pass into the creature eating the plant tissue.



Ráckeve-Soroksár Danube, Csepel Island (left) Molnár Island (opp.) from Vadevezős Street, Soroksár district, Budapest, Hungary. [Photo Credit: Globetrotter19 [CC-ASA 3.0](#)]

For example, the strontium signature formed in enamel no longer changes after youth. When researchers match that strontium signature in tooth enamel with strontium signatures in a region’s soil, they will have a good idea of where that person spent their childhood.

The strontium analysis showed that the female from 241 grew up somewhere other than Hungary. It showed a range of possible locations. Those locations ranged across Central Europe.

Her bronze neck-ring has a very similar style to those from southern Bohemia, Moravia, and Lower Austria. The strontium analysis included those three areas among her possible places of origin. The PLOS authors concluded that the elite female wore jewelry from southern Bohemia, Moravia, and Lower Austria.

She had moved to this part of Hungary between the ages of 8 and 13. She died between the ages of 25 and 35.

In contrast, metal workers from the Vatia culture almost certainly produced her gold hair ring. The presence of jewelry in her grave from both her “hometown” and her married life could have symbolic meaning.

The PLOS authors suggested that she could have brought the bronze neck-ring from her home village. It would have connected her to her origins. The locally produced gold hair-ring could have represented her new life.

Exogamy and patrilocality

[Phys.org](#) wrote that the levels of strontium in the remains of the adult females varied more than those of the adult males. Unlike adult females, adult males shared a common

region of origin.

The authors of the PLOS study reported that exogamy (marrying outside the group) and patrilocality (the female moving to where the man lived) was common "across Bronze Age societies in Europe." They suggested that these high-status marriages solidified alliances, economic, military, and political. This style of marriage lasted for 700 years.

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ABOUT SEAN MCSHEE



Highly alienated, over-educated, and under-employed, Sean McShee is a San Francisco ex-pat currently living in Fort Lauderdale. He writes on HIV issues and health issues for South Florida Gay News, and blogs movie reviews at <http://dreamingnoir.blogspot.com/>. He has worked with Reclaiming, the Feri Tradition, Radical Faeries, and now is studying with ADF.



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NeoWayland · a month ago · edited

"While biological sex could be determined for most adult remains, gender identity cannot be known."

OK, this one raises issues. We know that today most people have the same biological sex and gender identity. Admittedly things could have been different for that culture, but barring evidence those with a biological sex different from their gender identity are *at best barely* statistically significant.

That doesn't mean they are less, it just means they are extremely unusual.

I'm willing to bet that today there is a higher percentage with gender differences than there was then.

So why is this mentioned in an article about archeology?

2 ^ | v · Share



Lokisgodhi · NeoWayland · a month ago

Maybe not.

Most of today's biases against transsexuals, is the result of Christianity's biases being force fed to people and became societal biases in western countries where Christianity took hold.

2 ^ | v · Share



NeoWayland · Lokisgodhi · a month ago · edited

Oh boy.

Completely different subject, with it's own mostly unproven assumptions. And it has nearly nothing to do with the article.

1 ^ | v · Share



Baruch Dreamstalker · NeoWayland · a month ago

Perhaps the neck ring and/or hair ring were typical of individuals who identified as female, as distinct from biological gender markers in the bones. If some remains were anomalous in this regard, that could be assigned to a difference between biological gender and gender identity. Just a wild-ass guess. The article should have filled in how this is determined archaeologically.

1 ^ | v · Share



NeoWayland · Baruch Dreamstalker · a month ago · edited

I don't know. I use hair ties outside the house. On "dressy" occasions I'll replace it with a copper or silver clip. While my pendants aren't five inches across, most of them are at least an inch. Up until the early 20th, straight men did ornamentation too. In some times, men were the more flamboyantly dressed.

2 ^ | v - Share >


Baruch Dreamstalker → NeoWayland · a month ago

But we have no idea what gender norms for adornment were along the Danube in 2150-1500 BCE. Thus, "wild-ass guess." I do know gendered grave goods are an archaeological metric.

Perhaps the authors dragged in gender identity as a snark at Viktor Orban, who seeks to expunge Queerness from the Hungarian public space. Another wild-ass guess.

1 ^ | v - Share >


NeoWayland → Baruch Dreamstalker · a month ago

No we don't.

As long as no one claims it's any more than a WAG, I've got no problem.

1 ^ | v - Share >


Govannon Thunorwulf → NeoWayland · a month ago

I am a straight man that loves "ornamentation" as you call it. The only problem is, my body rejects most metals. I guess working with metal most of my life has made me hypersensitive to it.

1 ^ | v - Share >


NeoWayland → Govannon Thunorwulf · a month ago · edited

grins

I like it too, at least selected pieces. My fingers don't like rings anymore so these days it's almost all pendants, rotating nine depending on moon phase and other occasions. Right now I'm wearing my malachite bear fetish inspired one for the waning moon.

I put more store in jewelry than clothing.

^ | v - Share >


Nicole Thompson · a month ago

I don't see what the issue is, we don't know what her, gender role was. A lot of cultures in pre-Christian Europe were fairly lax about sexual roles.

^ | v - Share >

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